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ABSTRACT

This ERIC digest considers three important issues for educators of bilingual students, specifically Spanish-American children. First, it articulates the ongoing debate about which language to use for instruction. Second, it examines myths about the negative effects of bilingualism. And finally, it presents supporting evidence and suggestions for creating a responsive educational environment for bilingual Mexican-American students. The bilingualism debate pits those who believe that two-language instruction helps develop general language and thinking skills against those who believe early and intensive English instruction is the most effective and appropriate way for learning in an English-dominant environment. Early research identified bilingualism as a handicap, finding that bilingualism caused language confusion among children. More recent studies show that young children who live in nurturing bilingual environments do not develop linguistic handicaps and even demonstrate cognitive advantages over monolinguistic children. Current studies support the idea that bilingual language instruction should match the natural social context of the student, showing that the better a child masters language in general, the better that child performs academics in English. The digest concludes with five recommendations for teachers who wish to give rewarding instruction to bilingual and Spanish monolingual students. This digest includes 10 references. (TES)

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ERIC DIGEST

Clearinghouse on Rural Education and Small Schools September 1990

Bilingualism and the Academic Performance of Mexican-American Children: The Evolving Debate

Digest EDO-RC-90-9

LANGUAGE, in its broadest sense, is a complex social system that allows children to understand and influence their environment. For children whose normal language environment is bilingual, instruction need not be a worrisome affair. Teachers, however, need to understand several key characteristics of the bilingual instructional enterprise if they are to fulfill the social contract on which effective teaching is based.

This Digest will consider three important issues. First, it will articulate the debate that has, for decades, swirled around the education of bilingual students. Second, it will examine myths about the negative effects of bilingualism. And, finally, it will present what educators have done to ensure a responsive environment in which the communication and learning of bilingual Mexican-American students can thrive.

The debate

Debate has centered on which language to use for instruction: both Spanish and English, or English only. There is less debate about the goal of this instruction—to help students function effectively in environments where English is the dominant mode of communication.

On one side of this debate are supporters of bilingual instruction. They believe that instruction in two languages helps develop language and thinking skills that will transfer readily to English. The skills children develop in learning to read Spanish, for example, can be transferred to learning to read in English. On the other side of this debate are the supporters of instruction in English. They suggest that the earlier the exposure to English and the more time spent learning English, the easier the transition to English will be. Earlier and more intensive instruction in English, they believe, is most effective.

Supporters of each position, however, want to help students acquire English language skills, make short-term and long-term achievement gains, and realize eventual social and economic success. The following discussion considers this evolving debate in light of the most recent research on the topic.

The myth of language deficiency

In the arithmetic of language development, what does the need to function in two languages (bilingualism) add or subtract to a student's development? Early research on the effects of bilingualism painted a very bleak picture. In 1952, Thompson (see Hakuta, 1986) concluded, "There can be no doubt that the child who is exposed and reared deliberately in a bilingual environment is handicapped in his language growth." In essence, this view contended that learning one language is hard enough, so learning two must be at least twice as hard, particularly for a young child. This thinking led school administrators to discourage bilingual instruction in schools (Hakuta, 1986).

Most recent research suggests this conclusion is false. Both in the United States and throughout the rest of the world, recent research has shown that young children who live in *supportive and nurturing* bilingual environments *do not* develop linguistic handicaps (Garcia, 1983). This research has carefully documented the development of bilingualism in Mexican-American children and compared the result to the development of English in monolingual children. These comparisons clearly indicated that bilingual children, both at early and late periods of development, do not differ significantly from monolinguals. There were no significant differences on measures of vocabulary, phonological, or syntactic development. *Bilingualism itself* does not seem to interfere with the development of either language.

An interesting finding, sometimes negatively interpreted, is that bilingual children often move through a phase of *language mixing*. Bilingual children are at times, but not always, observed to use two languages as if they were one. For example, a child who is bilingual in both Spanish and English may say, "Yo quiero PLAY" (I want to PLAY), or, "yo estaba PLAYENDO" (I was PLAYING). In such cases, the child may use English vocabulary (or grammar) within the context of Spanish syntax. In the past, such instances of mixed language usage were interpreted as evidence of language confusion. Today, we understand mixed language usage as a normal developmental stage for some bilingual children. It resembles the way monolingual children, for example, say "sheeps" for the plural "sheep" or "deers" for the plural "deer" in the course of normal language development (Garcia & August, 1988).

In the United States, millions of young children are exposed to two languages. In fact, there are over 100 languages spoken in combination with English in this country's families. Instead of perceiving bilingualism as a liability, today's research suggests that bilingual children raised in supportive and nurturing environments demonstrate linguistic and cognitive *advantages* in comparison to monolingual children. Hakuta and Garcia (1989) reviewed the literature regarding the effects of bilingualism. According to them,

> The research evidence suggests that bilingual acquisition involves a process that builds on an underlying base for both languages. There does not appear to be a competition over mental processes by the two languages and there are even possible cognitive advantages to bilingualism. It is evident that the duality of the languages per se does not hamper the overall language proficiency or cognitive development of bilingual children. (p. 376)

Bilingualism was once viewed as a "bad habit," which, like all bad habits, needed to be ended as soon as possible. Today we can rest

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easy about the supposed harm bilingualism causes. Instead, we can actively cultivate the bilingual development of infants and children.

Effective schooling for bilingual students

Shouldn't bilingual students get as much instruction in English as possible? Don't bilingual children require *early and consistent* exposure to English so they can begin early to acquire the English that they will need to learn successfully? Isn't an English instructional placement *exactly* what is needed? Doesn't common sense require that these questions be answered with a "yes"?

When students are bilingual, recent empirical evidence has indicated that each question can, in fact, be answered with a clear "no." Bilingual language instruction that matches the natural social context of the child is recommended by research (e.g., California State Department of Education, 1981, 1986). The better a child masters language in general—including related cognitive and social skills of effective communication in two languages—the better the child can master academics in English (e.g., Willig, 1985).

Research evidence for this conclusion comes from a variety of studies comparing instructional practices. In addition, case studies provide descriptions of effective instructional practices found "naturally" in classrooms that serve academically successful bilingual students.

Willig (1985) and Wong-Fillmore and Valadez (1986) addressed the extensive comparative literature related to instructional practices that improve the development of literacy in bilingual populations. Almost all these studies have included bilingual Mexican-American students. Willig (1985) used metaanalysis to combine academic achievement scores from a large set of statistically unrelated studies. This metaanalysis indicated that bilingual education programs significantly enhanced academic achievement, in comparison to English instructional programs. Wong-Fillmore and Valadez (1986) provide a more traditional review of related independent studies and reach the same conclusion.

Garcia (1988) used a quite different approach to study the instructional practices of "effective" classrooms serving bilingual Mexican-American students. These classrooms produced high standardized academic achievement test scores (above national norms) for these students. Bilingual instructional environments were common in these classrooms. In addition, an integrated curriculum, responsive to the linguistic ability of students and implemented by trained bilingual (and biliterate) teachers, was common across the 14 classrooms of the study. In these classrooms children were made to feel that their bilingualism was an academic *asset*, not something for which they or their families needed to feel shame.

Cummins (1984) has been particularly concerned with how students and families perceive bilingualism. Cummins has found that, in some instructional situations, educators tend to view bilingual children and their families as "foreigners." The bilingual speech patterns of these children and their families mark them as "different," and this observed difference sometimes leads to prejudicial treatment.

Such treatment is based on the natural tendency to view with suspicion individuals who are different from the norm. Quite often, teachers try to eliminate the attributes that make these children seem so foreign. Unfortunately, such attempts serve only to provoke negative reactions from bilingual students and families.

Such reactions, on both parts, are understandable. The point is that the burden for short-circuiting this cycle of suspicion falls on educators. Bilingual students—like all students—need to be appreciated and respected for their differences (Cummins, 1984). There is, in fact, reason to celebrate such differences.

Conclusion

Understanding the above issues can help teachers provide instruction to bilingual and Spanish monolingual students in a way that will make the experience rewarding for them and their students.

Teachers might consider the following recommendations:

- Become *better informed* about the recent research that reconsiders the advantages of bilingualism and the range of alternatives in bilingual education.
- Set aside all the *negative myths* and misunderstandings that have preoccupied debates about bilingualism.
- Provide a *secure communicative environment* for all children.
- Give students a rich linguistic environment that makes regular use of their *bilingualism for academic purposes.*
- Guard against *defensive behaviors and attitudes* that give the impression that the child's native language and culture are not valued.

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